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## CRITICISMS AND DISCUSSIONS.

### PRAGMATISM AND TRUTH.

*To the Editor of The Monist:*

I have just had the pleasure of reading your *Truth on Trial*, and have read it with very much interest. You make a very strong case against pragmatism, and yet, it seems to me, fail to appreciate its strong points. With apologies for attempting with the small equipment I possess to set right one who has with so much success devoted his life to the study and exposition of philosophy, I offer below a few objections to the arguments you present.

My first reference is to your section on pages 56 and 57 entitled "A Lie that Works Satisfactorily." It seems to me that you miss the pragmatist position there utterly.

Let us consider the question more carefully. Rothschild believes that if he can make the public believe that Napoleon has won the battle of Waterloo he (Rothschild) can take advantage of this belief on the part of the public (the investing public) to his own financial advantage. With this belief as a working hypothesis he proceeds to spread the report and at the same time so conduct his financial operations as to take advantage of those who believe the report. The judgment "works." Now Rothschild won, not because he believed a lie and the lie worked satisfactorily. Rothschild did not believe the lie that Napoleon had won at Waterloo. His dupes believed that Rothschild told the truth, acted on that belief, and found that it worked disastrously. Rothschild's judgment became true, his dupes' judgment became false. No better pragmatic example could have been chosen.

My second example is your definition of truth, especially that given on page 85. Does this fairly represent your definition? "Truth means that a subjective statement properly describes or represents an objective condition of things." Pragmatism says that "truth is a relation, not of our ideas to non-human realities, but of conceptual

parts of our experience to sensational parts" (William James, *The Meaning of Truth*, page 82). Now if by "an objective condition of things" you mean our perceptions, what Royce (*The World and the Individual*, page 95) calls sense-perceptions, then it would seem that there is no conflict between you and the pragmatists. But if you mean by "an objective condition of things" some objective reality outside of human experience, then of course you and they part company. But I find it difficult to understand just what connection with our thinking a reality entirely outside of human experience can have.

Let us take the case of the figure of the earth. There was a time in the experience of the race when it had not entered into the mind of man to conceive that the earth is a sphere. All his judgments that took into consideration the surface of the earth implicitly assumed that it was (or is) flat. And these judgments "worked." For all his purposes the earth is flat. Even to-day if a man builds his house on the assumption that the earth's surface is a plane and not the surface of a sphere, the judgment will work. For the purpose of supporting a house the surface is a plane. That is, it does not depart sufficiently from a plane surface to make any practical difference. Of course for the navigator, the engineer, the astronomer, that judgment will end in frustration, and is therefore not true. Then suppose that man had never discovered the sphericity of the earth. What could any so-called objective reality of this sort, entirely outside of his experience, have to do with the truth of his judgments? Truth is a relation of a part of our experience to other parts. If this lies outside our experience, our judgments can have no truth-relation whatever with it.

My third exception to your characterization of pragmatism is based on what you say on page 110, especially the following: "It no longer fits into the program of the 'new thought' movement, and pragmatism replaces it [the old ideal of truth] by a more elastic kind of truth which can change with the fashions, and makes it possible that we need no longer trouble about inconsistencies; for what is true to one need no longer be true to others, and the truth of to-day may be real now, and yet may become the error of tomorrow."

To the objection that according to pragmatism what is true to one need not be true to another, we may reply that experience is a social possession and that most things that are true to one must be

true to another. In most things our experiences are so nearly alike we may, and do, "postulate an irrelevance of differences." For the reason that we are social beings there cannot be anarchy in the realm of our truths. That there will be *some* difference in our truths the fact that we are also individuals will make inevitable. But in all those cases where social action is essential our truths will be nearly enough alike to work together.

To the objection that what is truth to-day may be error to-morrow, the answer is that if to-morrow is sufficiently distant in the future it may well be. Pragmatists, if a very humble member of the confraternity may speak for them, believe that *all* truth is in the process of change, some of it in very rapid process, some in a process so gradual as to be almost, or quite, imperceptible. Some truth is so well established that no change seems likely to occur in it within any time that can mean much to us. Maybe a figure may help us here. According to the geologist the whole surface of the earth, that is the land surface, is in process of weathering, from the lightest dust which the wind drives before it to the granite core of the mountain. But that does not mean that the earth's surface will all be changed to-morrow, or that the mountain climber of to-day will not find his mountain there next year, should he care to climb it again. So it is with truth. We cannot say that there is any part of it that will never be questioned and overthrown. But we can say that it is stable enough for us to find our way about in it, and be able to recognize the old peaks to-morrow.

I shall not apologize again. If this has not interested you, you have thrown it away long ago. If it has interested you, no apology is necessary.

Very sincerely yours,

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#### EDITORIAL REPLY.

In answer to your first point I have to say that you are right: "No better pragmatic example could have been chosen" than the Rothschild case of making a lie work. A lie may be made to work, but that will never change a lie into truth, as according to pragmatic terminology it ought to. The Rothschild case proves that the pragmatic definition of truth is somehow deficient.